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Creating Healthier Academic Work Environments: Exploring Best Practices at Departmental Level

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10. Description of the session (300-500 words)

One of the trends of the 21st Century is the notion of healthy individuals, organizations, communities, and work environments (Day, Kelloway, & Hurrell, 2014). Many of us as academics know that workplace health is crucial for student, faculty and staff success. Yet, as academics many of us work in academic environments that are unhealthy, compromising our overall well-being! Researchers on organizational leadership are beginning to pay attention to the quality of the work environment in universities and its impact on the well-being of academic faculty and staff (see Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua & Stough 2001; Houston, Meyer & Paewai, 2006; Harvard Magazine 2007; Knudsen, Bucks & Lindt, 2011). Some researchers have linked work place “ill health” to the rise of the so called “neoliberal university” characterized by a shift from university education as a public good to values of entrepreneurialism and profit making hence changing universities’ institutional climates to increasing job insecurities; workload concerns; job dissatisfaction; reduced autonomy, deteriorating quality of work relationships etc. (Fredman & Doughney, 2012; Zabrodska; Mudrak; Kveton, Blatny, Machovcova & Solvova, 2014)

Increasingly as academics we are familiar with narratives of unhealthy academic settings, described as toxic, typified by bullying, harassment and micro aggressions, which Thornton (2004) has argued is connected to the corporatization of academia. This presentation shares our proactive strategies to promote healthy departments in Education and Social Work. First, as a way of introduction we explore some of the challenges presented by the shift of a university from a public good to profit making and the impact to faculty well-being. Second, we define what we mean by the concept “healthy academic environments”; we provide a rationale: why should we be proactive about holistic health in academia? Third, using our experiences in Education and Social Work departments we highlight ways we are attempting to foster healthy academic environments particularly around a commitment to psychological health, culture of inclusivity, flexibility and continuous learning and unlearning unhealthy practices. Through sharing of our experiences and inviting participants to share their own experiences we highlight best practices in creating healthier academic environments emphasizing our intentionality to improving faculty, staff and student well-being. Participants will be asked to share in pairs and then report back to the larger group about their experiences with academic work place health. Following the presentation participants will be asked to add-on presenter’s information about best practices in creating healthier departments.